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ABSTRACT

Scholars from various disciplines who examine the role an individual plays in the family as a major influence on his/her literacy are currently considering a factor often overlooked by researchers. Mikhail Bakhtin, Basil Bernstein, David Bleich and others find a cause-and-effect relationship between literacy and family systems. This suggests the need to examine more completely the structure and dynamics of the family system. In 1983 Robert Beavers developed a continuum along which he could measure a family's effectiveness--with the optimal family operating as an open system fostering communication and literacy and the dysfunctional family (where relationships are guarded, painful, and hostile) discouraging or even punishing communication. Assuming that more than half of the families in the United States foster environments that create dysfunctional children, it follows that these children will have difficulty using language to communicate thoughts and feelings. (A 15-item selected bibliography on family, socioeconomic class, and literacy is attached.) (NH)

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Literacy and Illiteracy in the Family System

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Many researchers and scholars are examining how historical, educational, social, racial, and economic factors influence literacy. But within these larger social forces lies the foundation that they only vaguely mention: the family. In the context of our families, each of us learns our gender, class, race, and other social roles. And within these roles--according to the scholars--we develop literacy.

I will examine literacy scholarship from various disciplines and point out the connection these scholars make between literacy and the family system. Then I will explore some of the current theories of the family as a system and how this system influences literacy. A comparison of literacy research to family system theory will point to the influence that the family system has on literacy and on our struggle to develop literacy in our students.

Mikhail Bakhtin makes a fleeting reference to the connection between his mother and himself that formed his initial concept of literacy. Bakhtin's first experience with language is from his mother, his first family relationship. Through the interaction of language, his mother, and himself, Bakhtin developed not only a sense of self, but also his attitude toward language and learning. We learn literacy skills and behaviors in family relationships.

The second scholar, Basil Bernstein, reveals a cause-and-effect relationship between

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social relationships, family type, and linguistic codes. A social relationship, he argues, determines what is said, when it is said, and how it is said. Bernstein lists four major socializing agencies: family, peer group, school, and work. The role that members develop in these systems determine their language code. In a closer look past the economic system to the family system, Bernstein determines that the role one plays in the family determines his or her language code. Bernstein validates the context of the family as an influence on one's literacy.

David Bleich also explores the larger context of social relationships. In The Double Perspective, he touches on the mother-infant relationship, describing how the mother-infant relationship influences gender development. Like Bernstein, Bleich argues that literacy is embedded in our connection to others and that most people "are brought into language through the first relationship with their mothers" (26). The infant's relationship with the mother is the initial influence on the infant's literacy. The intimate literacy of the mother-infant relationship develops into the "highly differentiated and socially shaped styles of language we find in adulthood" (126). At this point Bleich establishes a solid relationship between literacy and the family relationship of mother and infant.

For Paulo Freire the cause of illiteracy is the economic, social, and political oppression that is taught in the schools and in the family. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he examines how the education system is the major instrument used to maintain this overwhelming control. Students are prescribed into the oppressor's consciousness through

the "banking system" of education (58). They receive deposits of information as knowledge which serve to indoctrinate them into the ideology of the oppressors.

While the oppressed are kept in their place through the banking system of education, the oppressors learn their active roles of control from the family. Freire states that "the parent-child relationship in the home usually reflects the objective cultural conditions of the surrounding social structure." Freire claims that the oppressive role is taught through the family. As children live in a dominating family, they internalize the role of oppressor. One of the basic rules of this rigid domination in the family is "Do not think." The oppressors blindly follow the rules--not examing who and why they are oppressing. This system of paternal authority that begins in the family is carried on by the school.

Like Bernstein, Freire shows a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the family and literacy. In an authoritarian and rigid home where children are taught blindly to follow the rules, no one engages in praxis. Children do not learn how to converse with others in order to critically analyze their world. The family and education system teaches children to be silent objects who are acted upon by others.

This position of silence is also addressed by Adrienne Rich. Rich describes the women in her classrooms as silent students in the object position, struggling to find a voice. A woman is taught early that "tones of confidence, challenge, anger, or assertiveness, are strident and unfeminine" (243).

Rich attributes these rules of passivity to the nuclear family. Women are silenced early in life by a family rule: "Do not talk." Women's family relationships and family rules create their gender role. This role of passivity and silence renders women illiterate.

Like Freire, Rich attributes silence and illiteracy to the role one maintains. Both see the illiterate as one who does not critically engage in dialogue to shape his or her world, and is therefore in a position of powerlessness. According to Rich, this object position is created as the woman learns her gender role in the family.

In Women's Ways of Knowing: Development of Self, Voice, and Mind, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule also investigate the phenomena of women's silence and find a relationship with the family. Belenky's research points out that a woman's epistemology influences her ability to have a voice. The two biggest influences of woman's epistemology are "the family and the schools" (4).

Belenky found five different perspectives from which women create their knowledge. After a discussion of each perspective, she describes the type of family each group of women reported, noting that "the women who held each of the different ways of knowing ... tended to tell a common story of family" (156).

Belenky describes the nuclear families of the silent women as chaotic, unpredictable, and violent. In this group of families, talk has little value or is actively discouraged. The children grow up in silence. In the absence of dialogue, the families use violence and yelling rather than talk. There is blatant abuse, both physical and sexual. This family environment leaves "children speechless [and] unwilling to develop their capacities for hearing and knowing" (159).

Belenky develops a clear connection between literacy and family environment. She reports that only a few of the women interviewed were able to move past the epistemological atmospheres of their nuclear families. The rules within the family control

what is said--"the politics of talk." These family rules can keep a women illiterate and out of the subject role.

This cause-and-effect relationship between literacy and the family system suggests the need to examine more completely the structure and dynamics of the family system. The most obvious trait of the American family is its decline as a traditionally supportive system. Statistics emphasize divorce, single parent families, and latch key children. In a 1980 study of 500 teenagers from a wide range of classes and regions of the country, Bernard Lefkowitz found that sixty percent left home because no one listened to them.

The connection between literacy and the family leads us to the experts on family system structure and dynamics. What do the experts say about the family, and how might that influence our attitude toward literacy?

Researchers have been analyzing the family as a system that permeates our American culture. As our culture and values change, family types change: for example single-parent, extended, and cohabitation families. Even though family types are changing, we are still born into some kind of system that feeds, clothes, nurtures, and teaches its members. The experts on family structure and dynamics describe the family as:

> a natural social system, with properties all its own, one that has evolved a set of rules, roles, a power structure, forms of communication, and ways of negotiation and problem solving that allow various tasks to be performed effectively. (Goldenberg, Irene 3)

The essence of the family is the relationships that are maintained through the communication of family members. Essentially, the family is a set of relationships,

evidenced through communication (Wolman 66). To function effectively, a family system must maintain clear communication. Beck and Jones conducted a survey in 1973 that reported poor communication as the major problem reported by couples seeking family counseling (Goldenberg, Irene 51). This communication greatly influences the language use of the children.

In 1983, Robert Beavers developed a continuum along which he could measure a family's effectiveness. Beavers' research found two key differences between healthy and unhealthy families: "the family's capacity to communicate thoughts and feelings, and the central role played by the parental coalition in providing family leadership" (Goldenberg, Herbert 76-7).

In the Beavers System Model, families are classified on a five point scale according to their ability to communicate and solve problems, and their use of the parents as role models. Beavers found that effective families at the optimal end of the continuum have "flexible, adaptable, goal-achieving systems" (Goldenberg, Irene 42). These optimal functioning families support their members growth and change. Communication is promoted. They respect rather than silence each other's voices. The optimal functioning family operates as an open system, open to interaction with others and change. This family system fosters communication and literacy.

At the other end of the continuum is the severely disturbed system, "the most inflexible, undifferentiated, and ineffective systems" (Goldenberg, Irene 42-43). In dysfunctional families, relationships are guarded, painful, distant, and hostile. Communication and literacy are discouraged and even punished.

Beavers' three middle levels of this continuum comprise the largest group of families. He warrants that the "moderately dysfunctional families probably comprise the largest group, greater than the family groups at either end of the continuum" (Goldenberg, Irene 44). In Beavers' study, it is evident that four of the five levels of families exhibit some form of dysfunction. I believe that it is safe to conclude that approximately eighty percent of the families on this continuum exhibit an inability to communicate thoughts and feelings.

Beaver notes another important correlation. A relationship exists between the level of family system competence and the level of the children's functioning. This inability of the dysfunctional family system to communicate thoughts and feelings influences the ability of the children to communicate. Assuming that more than half of the families in the United States foster environments that create dysfunctional children, we can conclude that these children will have difficulty using language to communicate their thoughts and feelings. It follows that more than half of the children who come to our classrooms have been living in a family system that fosters some level of language and intellectual oppression.

Dysfunctional families silence their children. They are discouraged from interacting with others and possibly punished for this. Their family system teaches isolation. When we ask these students to participate in a class discussion, express their opinion in a piece of writing, or critique a peer's essay, we are asking them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings, a method of communication that has been discouraged and even punished in their families.

In a dialogic classroom, we ask students to disobey solid family rules. The basic rules in a dysfunctional family are (1) Don't talk, (2) Don't think, and (3) Don't feel

(Whitfield 47). In the closed family system, children are told not to discuss family issues with anyone. These rules maintain family balance by preventing any members from questioning the status quo. In this closed communication system, the parents impose authority and knowledge on the children. The children are told what to think and what to do, never analyzing any choices or situations in their lives. This rigidity forces children to be critically illiterate. They cannot "name the world," one of Freire's essential human tasks. Families suppress children's voices and forbid them from examining their world. Children in dysfunctional families are discouraged from dialogue.

In the classroom, we invite students to read, talk, think, and write--to actively analyze the world. This is a blatant contradiction to the passive role they have learned in their families. They have lived by the authority of the family system which has determined their language use and intellectual activity. They do not know how to act in any other way. Now, the teacher, the authority in the classroom, wants them to analyze and critique texts and develop their own answers. If the teacher moves out of the position of authority and fosters their independence, students from dysfunctional familie will not know how to operate in the subject position. They continue to ask the teacher exactly what he or she wants.

Teachers are working not only with students but also with students' family systems. Behavior patterns learned in families of origin are strong. Family therapists report that children carry their family roles and rules into their school environment. They recreate the same family system in the classroom that they experience at home; it is the only way they know how to operate. As a result, we challenge much more than our students when we

fight illiteracy.

We must explore many more aspects of the family system. Our job is not to change families but to continue our investigation past the study of the isolated, intellectual ability of our students. Only by acknowledging our students' passive roles in the larger systems that surround and control them, can we begin to see how to move them to active subject positions that allow them to critique and name their worlds.

While collecting this professional knowledge, we can also investigate our literacy. What in our families caused our hyper literacy? Growing up in a dysfunctional family, I became hyper literate to fulfill my role as the hero. I am the oldest child--the hero whose role is to succeed and bring good things to my family. Don Wegscheider says that the family is proud of the hero's achievements at home and in school. I worked hard at school. I studied, made A's, and presided over many organizations. Reading became my forte which started in the second grade because of a contest. The teacher gave a prize to the student who read the most books. I won and continued to read.

To succeed in the English classroom, I also had to write, and I had to do it well--especially after Ms. Clayton said to me in front of the entire class "Liz, if you're going to college you need to learn how to write." Ms. Clayton scared me away from writing because she had no idea how to teach me to write. When I did find a teacher who could teach me to write, I also succeeded. So much so that I read and wrote my way to a Ph.D. in English and a paper on literacy at Four CCCCs. I invite you to examine the influence that your family has on your literacy.

Literacy: Family and Socioeconomic Class
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